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C O N F I D E N T I A L LIBREVILLE 000688

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SUBJECT: GABONESE PUBLIC BORED, POLITICIANS FASCINATED, BY
IMPENDING LEGISLATIVE ELECTIONS

REF: LIBREVILLE 300

Classified By: DCM Katherine Dhanani. Reason: 1.4 (d).

11. (C) Summary: Most of the 877 candidates competing for 120 seats during Gabon's December 17 legislative elections have no chance of success, regardless of whether the elections are free and fair. The large majority of the winners will likely come from President Bongo's Gabonese Democratic Party (PDG), which currently holds 88 seats. Other parties that participate in the coalition supporting the President had hoped to combine slates with the PDG, but are being forced to run alone, against PDG candidates in every constituency. Opposition parties decided not to boycott this election after Bongo agreed to meet some of their demands for electoral reform. There is limited interest in the contest, although some curiosity about whether Bongo promised opposition leader Mamboundou assembly seats when Mamboundou left his refuge in the South African Embassy in April. End summary.

12. (U) While the campaign for Gabon's December 17th legislative election will officially begin only on December 2, the Gabonese political class is already fully engaged in politicking. On November 16 the National Electoral Commission announced that 877 candidates would compete for the 120 seats in the National Assembly. President Bongo's PDG is running candidates in all 120 constituencies, and President Bongo began a program of travel to the provinces on November 21, ostensibly to review progress on implementation of his promised Acts for Gabon. Several opposition parties are fielding broad slates, although their prospects of success may be more narrowly linked to geographical strengths: the Union of Gabonese People (UPG) has a slate of 96 candidates, and Zachary Myboto's newly registered Gabonese Union for Democracy and Development (UGDD) is fielding 71.

13. (U) President Bongo's successful mediation of political dialog in May paved the way for participation of the full universe of opposition actors in this election. The prospects for a fully democratic exercise looked relatively dim in March when security forces launched an early morning raid on the headquarters of opposition leader Pierre Mamboundou. After escaping the March 21 raid, UPG leader Mamboundou holed up in the South African Embassy until holding an April 19 meeting with President Bongo (reftel). The truce established at that time paved the way for inter-party talks at which opposition leaders aired demands for electoral reforms, backed by threats to boycott the legislative elections. Fourteen parties supporting President Bongo and twelve opposition parties met from May 12 to 24, but failed to agree on most points. President Bongo listened to both sides and announced his decisions on May 26. Among the most important concessions to the opposition were decisions to give an official copy of polling station results

to candidates' representatives, to discontinue the practice of holding a separate round of military voting, and to create a new, permanent electoral commission. Bongo refused outright an opposition request to reinstate a second round of balloting in races where no candidate gains a majority, and yielded marginally to demands that a single ballot be implemented, agreeing only to experiment with a single ballot during local elections in 2007. Nevertheless, the opposition parties unanimously accepted the deal offered by the President and agreed to participate in the vote.

14. (C) The President also significantly shaped the elections when he rejected appeals from some of his supporters, led by Deputy Prime Minister Paul Mba Abessole of the Gathering for Gabon (RPG), that he form a new coalition party, the Union for a Presidential Majority, that would field a single candidate in each constituency. Mba Abessole and other leaders in the coalition supporting the President fear their chances in direct competition with the better-financed PDG. Bongo's decision has led to some interesting match-ups, including a face off in one of Libreville's districts between Prime Minister Jean Eyeghe Ndong and Vice PM Mba Abessole. (Insiders say Abessole stands no chance of winning, but will be bought off with a promise of continued prominence in the cabinet.)

15. (C) Comment: The Gabonese public shows little interest in this election, and with good reason: the important contest in Gabon was held a year ago, when President Bongo won re-election with an implausibly large mandate. (Bongo's prominent role in laying the foundation for these legislative elections is further evidence that the Presidency is the one post that really matters in Gabon.) The president has skillfully managed the pre-election period to avoid boycotts or protests. The question now becomes the extent to which he

will seek to manage electoral outcomes. Many observers believe that in April Bongo cut a deal with Mamboundou that included a promise of a certain number of legislative seats for the UPG. This suggests the election will be massaged to create appropriate numbers of winners from different camps, most plausibly before election day through the allocation of resources, but possibly on election night when results are compiled. PDG party barons, however, have their own human and financial resources and appear unlikely to concede seats even if the boss requests it. We will be surprised if the PDG takes fewer than the 88 seats it won last time, although opposition candidates may win more than the handful of seats they won in 2001. (Most of the eight other parties represented in the Assembly are members of the Bongo's coalition, and most of the 12 independent legislators also support the President.)

WALKLEY